

## Hamlet performed at Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz

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arm across the back of the sofa, reaching for and touching Antonio in a silent acknowledgement of their emotional relationship. For Portia, the realization was heartbreaking that she was, in fact, alone in her marriage as she handed Antonio the ring to return to Bassanio.

Portia's refuge from her desolation became a bizarre parody of the first half's television game show as she donned her costume—including a blonde wig and a pair of stiletto heels that resembled Cinderella's opaque shoes from the Disney film—and proceeded to read out the news from the Rialto as if she were still playing *Destiny*. "Three of your argosies," she read excitedly from a cue card in her high-pitched television voice. At the play's conclusion, Goold's choice of music attempted to influence the audience's emotional reaction as Elvis's *Are You Lonesome Tonight?* played out after Gratiano's final speech, beginning *in media res* with "Is your heart filled with pain." Effectively using the reprise, Goold's production employed Elvis's original recording of the song. Unlike in its earlier upbeat (and faster) appearance in the production, the pace of this rendition filled the auditorium with a melancholic aura, adding to the pathos of Portia's emotional state and again guiding the audience toward a particular emotional response. Taking her wig off her head, twirling with it held first upright and then clutched to her chest, Portia teetered unsteadily on a lone Cinderella slipper, sobbing while trying to plaster the beauty queen's smile on her face. With Bassanio slumped on the couch, Portia was indeed lonesome tonight and Rupert Goold had led the audience through an emotional ringer in the final moments. Caught in a spotlight, dancing uncertainly on one heel, clutching desperately the accoutrements of the only shallow existence she had known, Portia was unable to cope with the reality into which she had stumbled. We, as audience members, could feel that we were *Lonesome Tonight* with her and through Elvis's lyrics, as some of us were left *Crying* at her tragedy.



### *Hamlet*

Presented by the **Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz**, at the **Barbican Theatre**, London. November 30–December 4, 2011. Directed by Thomas Ostermeier. Set by Jan Pappelbaum. Costumes by Nina Wetzel. Music by Nils Ostendorf. Dramaturgy and German version by Marius von Mayenburg. With Robert Beyer (Polonius/Osrik), Lars Eidinger (Hamlet), Urs Jucker (Claudius/Ghost), Judith Rosmair (Gertrude/Ophelia), Sebastian Schwarz (Horatio/Guildenstern), and Stefan Stern (Laertes/Rosencrantz); other characters played by the company.

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Urs Jucker's Claudius confessed "my offense is rank" (3.3.36) through a handheld microphone, ditching the stage and ascending the steps of an aisle in the stalls. He carefully examined the consequences of his actions, both in this world and the hereafter, in the midst of an audience with whom he communicated directly. His delivery was sincere and unadorned, a moment of breathtaking simplicity in a production of heart-pounding theatricality. Director Thomas Ostermeier broke the fourth wall in order to take us inside the mind and soul of Shakespeare's afflicted villain.

In act five of the same production, Lars Eidinger's Hamlet asked Laertes for forgiveness in a speech the actor underlined as key. Identifying his own madness as the agent that wronged Laertes, this Hamlet took his time genuinely to discover each agonized step in the logic that revealed how he himself was "of the faction that is wronged. / His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy" (5.2.175–6). He then instructed the deputy stage manager to raise the auditorium lights and, after shaking hands with Laertes, jumped down from the stage to roam the auditorium, blowing raspberries at startled spectators as he thrust imaginary rapiers into their chests. As Hamlet's distraction furiously returned, and the boundary between a performed madness and its reality broke down, this production dismantled the fourth wall a second time. Anarchic gestures such as these led reviewers to attest to a powerful *affective* dynamic in a "thrilling" performance that taxed, affronted, and exhilarated audiences.

Indeed, the presentation of Ostermeier's 2008 German language *Hamlet* at the Barbican in 2011 became a significant cultural moment. Both critics and practitioners saw the production as a radical, confrontational act, contesting the tired representational strategies of a sclerotized form of social realism endemic in British theater and its approach to Shakespeare. Director Ramin Grey urged the RSC to headhunt Ostermeier as Michael Boyd's replacement: "Like the theatrical equivalent of the Eurozone Greeks, we need a German bailout now" (qtd. in Charlotte Higgins's Arts Diary, *Guardian* 6 Dec. 2011, web). Far from contesting the hegemonic logic of British theatrical production, however, Ostermeier's *Hamlet* actually *recast* familiar realistic representational strategies, albeit in often provocative ways. This production challenged aesthetic conventions whilst structuring an identification with Shakespeare's text that remained compatible with a realist framework. In fact, Ostermeier's underlying realist proclivities reveal why his work, invited to the Barbican four times since 2004, is so fêted in the UK.

The giant playground in which Ostermeier's actors roamed, designed by his frequent collaborator Jan Pappelbaum, offered a visual demon-

stration of how Ostermeier's aesthetic transcends, and yet reinvests in, realism. Three components made up this *Hamlet* environment. Firstly, in a choice reminiscent of Pina Bausch's *Rite of Spring*, a pit of soil covered the stage and, as became clear in the first ten minutes, functioned as old King Hamlet's graveyard. A giant gold beaded-metal curtain trucked upstage and downstage on runners at either side of this earth-covered playing space, foregrounding theatricality as a central, mobile metaphor; Hamlet staged his "antic disposition" to a Court in which the boundaries between reality and performance kept shifting. Finally, a wedding banquet table, also able to truck upstage and downstage over the graveyard, made manifest Hamlet's declaration that "the funeral baked meats / Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables" (1.2.179–80). Just as Pappelbaum concretized the forces that exert psychological pressure on the protagonist, Ostermeier had his actors interact with the set in ways that actualized the constellation of character psychology and emotional realism latent in Shakespeare's language. The soil became all that was "rank and gross" under the surface of glossy "seeming"; Eidinger's Hamlet constantly ate it, slung it at other characters (particularly Ophelia) and slammed it on the white linens of the banquet table when accused of "seeming" himself by the hypocrites who populated this Denmark (1.2.75).

Ostermeier's actors were dressed in a generic contemporary wardrobe: dark suits for the men and a simple white top and trousers for Ophelia, augmented by a platinum wig, sunglasses, and a bridal veil when the same actress played Gertrude. Resisting reference to any concrete social context, this production affirmed a realist epistemology authenticated via the *psychological* and *emotional* experience of the central character, who left the stage only once. Whereas the five other actors morphed in and out of Shakespeare's cast of characters, Lars Eidinger as Hamlet embodied a stable perspective, rooting this production in an individual reality.

Accordingly, Ostermeier began with Hamlet in close up, Eidinger's face projected in giant widescreen vitality onto the beaded curtain behind which the actors were assembled. Speaking the words to a self-operated handheld camera, Eidinger began his performance with "Sein oder Nichtsein" ("To be or not to be," 3.1.57), his Hamlet subverting expectations from the start. It was when his monologue to camera faltered over the phrase "perchance to dream" (3.1.67), however, that this production established Hamlet's subjectivity as its frame. As Eidinger repeated this phrase he turned the camera around, now a technological supplement to his own vision, and it became clear that it wasn't capturing his dream so much as his nightmare: the first thing he/we saw, projected large onto the



Fig. 3. Hamlet (Lars Eidinger) sits on the edge of the platform behind the curtain (stage right), framing his own close up as the assembled cast wait to begin the Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz's 2011 production of *Hamlet*, directed by Thomas Ostermeier. Photo courtesy of Arno Declair.

gold curtain, was his mother, Gertrude, paddling palms with his uncle in a grotesque mime sequence that went on to introduce us to the other actors/characters before they emerged from behind the curtain. We in the audience were Hamlet, looking through his lens, thrown into the tumult of his fevered sleep, and he, like us, was watching—the spectator of an extended slapstick routine in which Stephan Stern's solo gravedigger attempted to bury a coffin that refused to go down. Apart from the abortive run Eidinger took at Hamlet's act three soliloquy, Shakespeare's playtext was not heard for another ten minutes. Instead, Ostermeier choreographed old King Hamlet's burial as a botched, rain-drenched, wordless spectacle to a blistering soundtrack from *Godspeed You! Black Emperor*. The sequence announced this production's boisterous physicality, its anarchic temperament, and the excruciating fusion of the farcical and the tragic that crystalizes Hamlet's disposition at the start of the play.

This *Hamlet* not only invented a new beginning for Shakespeare's play, it also ended before the playtext's end. Act five's fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes descended into a fragmented dream sequence, the other characters becoming grotesque, stuttering marionettes, looping the

choreography of their grisly own ends. Judith Rosmair's Gertrude poured a cup of blood over her veiled head and twirled like a broken doll. Stern's Laertes repeatedly pointed his soul to heaven, puppet-like, punching his fist in the air and collapsing his body at the hips. All remained stuck behind the banquet table as it was sucked upstage into darkness, leaving Hamlet alone, forced to the front of the stage by the advancing metal curtain. A sonic cacophony hurtled us through a montage of dialogue culled from the preceding two hours and forty minutes of performance. Hamlet stared out at us, his blue eyes wide in the stark white light as the sound crescendoed and then cut out. Eidinger paused; the curtain halted, its beads swinging; and then he spoke: "The rest is silence" (5.2.300). Cut to blackout. The nightmare was over.

Every element of the production transported us inside Hamlet's head. With only six actors, Ostermeier made doubling function as an index to his protagonist's state of mind. In one of Hamlet's periodic soliloquies to camera, projected onto the gold curtain, he turned and filmed the wedding party, focusing on Gertrude as he declared, "Frailty, thy name is woman" (1.2.146). She licked her fingers—and Claudius's head—in the kind of lurid, sexually provocative sequence Hamlet seemed to generate whenever he pointed his aperture at her. As his soliloquy ended, we witnessed Gertrude transforming into her son's lover through Hamlet's (digital) eyes; as Rosmair peeled off her blonde wig and removed her sunglasses, Ophelia emerged from Hamlet's mother, and Ostermeier cut straight into 1.3, where Laertes urges caution in Ophelia's dealings with Hamlet. In an interview with the Berlin magazine *ExBerliner*, Ostermeier argued that the performance demonstrated psychology here: "Hamlet's mistake is that he doesn't see the difference between Ophelia and his mother; for what his mother did, he punishes Ophelia" (31 Dec. 2010, web). The reading gave license to Hamlet's misogyny, which was foregrounded in Eidinger's brutal, sexualized groping of Rosmair's Ophelia in the nunnery scene (where he attempted to undress, rape, and bury her alive) and justified, problematically, in terms of Hamlet's victimhood.

Conversely, in one of the production's boldest strokes, Hamlet donned stockings and suspenders (and little else) to perform Gertrude in a "blood and sperm" rendition of the play-within-the-play. Hamlet/Gertrude simulated sex with Sebastian Schwartz's almost naked, obese Player King, wrapping him in cling film and splashing his constrained body with blood and milk. It was fascinating to watch Eidinger's Hamlet's (failed) attempt to mobilize performance in order to understand his mother's psychology; his asides to her became a commentary on his inability to compute her actions.





Fig. 4. Judith Rosmair as Ophelia and Lars Eidinger as Hamlet in the Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz's 2011 production of *Hamlet*, directed by Thomas Ostermeier. Photo courtesy of Arno Declair.



Fig. 5. Hamlet (Lars Eidinger) as Gertrude/Player Queen in “The Mousetrap,” wrapping the Player King (Sebastian Schwartz) in cling film in the Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz’s 2011 production of *Hamlet*, directed by Thomas Ostermeier. Photo courtesy of Arno Declair.





Fig. 6. Hamlet (Lars Eidinger) gets tangled in the theatricality of his feigned madness in the Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz's 2011 production of *Hamlet*, directed by Thomas Ostermeier. Photo courtesy of Arno Declair.

Visceral theatricality, then, doesn't disavow realism. Through the deployment of brash theatrical tactics, Ostermeier reasserted a realist paradigm. In fact, he explicitly articulated his treatment of Shakespeare's play in terms of a *politicized* "realism" that resisted the "idealistic" view of Hamlet traditionally taken by artists. Speaking to YouTube channel THEATRO.TV, Ostermeier argued that "You can always see the vanity of the director and the main actor playing Hamlet," who tend to model themselves on the typical posture associated with Hamlet as the intellectual, romantic hero—what Ostermeier terms "the cliché of the last pure soul in a bad world." In Ostermeier's eyes, such vanity allows both artists and audiences to absolve themselves of guilt over their own political inactivity.

Ostermeier, by contrast, prioritizes unflinching honesty in his practice. In the same interview he described how Eidinger's expletive-stuttering Hamlet (who feigned madness with bouts of "ficken/fuck" Tourette's Syndrome) is "as mediocre as the world around him, as corrupted, as rotten as the rest of Denmark." Perhaps it is vanity in another guise that invites audiences to locate integrity in this kind of realism. However, with psychological acuity underpinning bold theatricality at every step, it should be no surprise that British audiences understood this irreverent and unconventional *Hamlet* as an aesthetic provocation. Though it was cast as a German bailout of a bankrupt British socio-realist approach to Shakespeare, this *Hamlet* enjoyed a reception predicated on its congruence with the British appetite for realism.

Ironically, Ostermeier states that many Germans view his work as a conservative reaction against a far more radical and popular discourse in his native theater: one grounded in Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre* (1999). At a 2013 roundtable on European Theater at the Goethe Institut, London, Ostermeier told the audience that "when somebody makes theater like I do, which you might consider as completely edgy, in Germany it is considered as completely old school." His comments, and this production, open up a fascinating debate about the relationship between two vibrant theatrical cultures, and, within them, the status of "realism" as an aesthetic category.

